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**STRENGTH OF CHARACTER NANCY'S CHARACTER IN
DRAMATIZING THE CONFLICTS AND TENSIONS IN
'OLIVER TWIST'**



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ABSTRACT

Women characters in Dickens have often been seen as inadequate and have remained caricatures or types. Nancy, I shall argue, is an outstanding exception in Dickens' early fiction. She is one of the most powerfully conceived and created characters in Dickens. She is the only character in 'Oliver Twist' who develops, or in E. M. Forster's phrase, acquires "roundness" during the course of the novel. . Nancy becomes admirable in the quality of her suffering of her struggle in the face of a fate that she clearly recognizes to be inevitable.

KEYWORDS :Victorian, Morality, Underworld, Suffering, Street children, Tragic Strength.



INTRODUCTION :

Women characters in Dickens have often been seen as inadequate and have remained caricatures or types. Nancy, I shall argue, is an outstanding exception in Dickens' early fiction. She is one of the most powerfully conceived and created characters in Dickens. She is the only character in 'Oliver Twist' who develops, or in E. M. Forster's phrase, acquires "roundness" during the course of the novel. During the action of the novel Nancy is plunged into a tormenting conflict of

loyalties, yet she fights her way out of degrading social compulsions, depression and hysteria, takes a bold step and achieves, in death, tragic nobility that raises her stature from that of a mere woman of the streets to the conscious complexity of a tragic protagonist. Nancy becomes admirable in the quality of her suffering of her struggle in the face of a fate that she clearly recognizes to be inevitable. Truly, in this sense, Nancy is the tragic heroin of the novel. Nancy's character presents contradictions which led many critics to doubt her reality, but Dickens, we know, tells them what he knows, that is, Nancy is "True".

In *Oliver Twist* Brownlow, Rose Malyie, Hary Malyie on one hand and Fagin, Sikes, Bumble on the other define a morality structure. These characters are conceived as abstractions and the good are meant to triumph over the bad. Nancy's "genuine humanity" relieves her from the clutches of this pattern in *Oliver Twist*. Against this 'morality play' pattern of the novel, Nancy's character follows the complex pattern that is the pattern of life itself.

Nancy is a victim not of her nature but of social circumstances. She says to Fagin, "I thieved for

you when I was a child not half as old as this! ... It is my living; and you are the wretch that drove me to them long ago."

She is compelled to lead a criminal life and carries the theme of the victim more intensely than Oliver does. We are shown Nancy's prowess at deceit when she restores Oliver to Fagin, nevertheless, her reformation begins as soon as she comes into close contact with Oliver who is presented in the novel as the touchstone of virtue. Nancy's act "is a nightmare parody of social pretences and what they conceal, a sort of analogue to the pomposities of Bumble and the realities of the workhouse" says John Bailey, because Nancy's act is informed by the very philosophy which motivates the workhouse officers. Her revulsion when Oliver is brought back to Fagin's den is one of the most moving things in the book because the denizens of the underworld suppose that she is still keeping up the role: "you are acting beautiful" says Fagin. Nancy's growing conflict dramatizes the limited nature of the options open to the poor. It is the conflict that symbolizes (as does the scene in which Oliver asks for more) the theme of the "two nations".

Here is the beginning of Nancy's reformation, a reformation that is rendered in terms of her increasing consciousness about the behaviour of her past social and moral reality and intensified loathing of it on the one hand and on the other, her urgency to commit herself selflessly to human situation. When the burglary at Chertsey fails, Nancy says to Oliver, "I hope he is dead, and out of harm's way and out of yours..." Here we see Nancy's helplessness as well as her new recognition of , and her will to speak for innocence.

Later when Nancy goes to meet Rose Maylie in order to save Oliver, she is completely changed. Nancy has become truly sublime. Nancy seeks to save a fellow human being at great risk to herself and without regard to her own salvation. Nancy knows the consequences of her act but in her new indifference towards her own fate and her readiness to die. Nancy achieves the dignity of Sainthood without any of its righteousness. Nancy does not betray her friend, Sikes. She knows that Sikes cannot live without her and that his condition will become worse than before. She tells Rose "I am drawn back to him through every suffering and ill usage; and I should be, I believe, If knew that I was to die by his hand at last". Her love for Sikes is not an 'infatuation' nor a habit but a commitment which she keeps up till her death. Indeed, it is hard to say whether it is Nancy's helping of Oliver or her refusal to forsake Sikes that carries the more profound moral weight in the novel. At any rate, the two motivations present eloquently the nature of Nancy's conflict and the truth with which Dickens is able to present her.

Nancy is not the lower aspect of Oliver, and we disagree with H. M. Delaski who says "Rose is an Oliver who is saved from the workhouse; Nancy is an Oliver whose goodness does not save her from the streets." Actually Nancy needs no protection. It is a question in the novel as to whether it is Nancy or Rose who actually needs to be saved, because if a repentant sinner willing at least to throw herself into even a single selfless act is dearer to Christ than the righteous pharisee, then Nancy also, Mary Magdalene like, forgets her own salvation. No doubt, Nancy is a victim of circumstances and she lives in the streets but she is capable of protecting herself as well as others. She tries heroically to protect Sikes, Fagin and the members of the gang as well as Oliver; of Sikes she says, "I cannot leave him now! I could not be his death." She thinks the whole of the underworld a family although a doomed, sinful and desperate family yet she does not want any of the members of the gang to be endangered. She has affection for her 'family' because it is they from whom she gets sustenance, not from the civilized and cultured people. She knows her reality that like them she is also a criminal, she says, "...I'll not turn upon them, who might –any of them turned upon me, but didn't bad as they are..."she will not deliver even Fagin. She says to Rose, "Devil that he is, and worse than devil as he has been to me, I will never do that."

Thus we see how Nancy dramatizes the central conflict between the binaries of the good and bad. She is tormented between her attachment to the fellow criminals and her love for Oliver. If the later Nancy has a flaw, it is that she obeys her best that is most humane instincts. Ironically however, she lives in an environment where people are so reduced to an amoral animal level that nothing virtuous can flourish there. Thus Nancy is seen as a threat and killed. Significantly Nancy's liquidation brings about in a rush the liquidation of the entire underworld.

Nancy further functions as a comment on the bourgeois Victorian attitudes. Rose Maylie fails to understand her love for Sikes, calling it mere infatuation, because Victorian society allows only the so called love where both parties are clean, well to-do and handsome. Nancy says to Rose "When ladies as young, and good, and beautiful as you are, give away your hearts, love will carry you all lengths- even such as you, who have home, friends, and other admirers, everything to fill them. When such as I; who have no certain rules but the coffin lid, and no friend in sickness, set our rotten hearts on any man, and let him fill the place that has been a blank throughout our wretched lives, who can hope to cure us?"

Nancy as she develops, fills us with contempt for Victorian moral and materialistic attitudes. Mr. Brownlow who is a gentleman misunderstands her. He measures her in terms of money and quite insensitively insults her by offering her money for the information. He thinks that he can buy information with money and fails to see Nancy's feelings for Oliver. "This purse, take it for my sake ..." Nancy tells him, "No! I have not done this for money." She would rather have something from Rose, "as having belonged to you, sweet lady."

It is Nancy, ironically, who gives value to Rose by conferring upon the letter her complete trust. We find Rose sweet and delicate when we compare her with Nancy. Rose's words seem angelic; she gets terrified at the idea of misery but Nancy has suffered all; that is why her words seem that of a damned soul. It is Nancy who humbles the beast like 'growling' Sikes. "Sikes acquires the form and conscience of a man, almost indeed of a spirit" says John Bailey. "Balanced face, sunken eyes, hollow cheeks ... it was the very ghost of Sikes." Sikes looks towards Charley Bates in a very pitiful condition so that he may talk to him and asks him very gently if he does not know him. Sikes's killing of Nancy makes him human in his awakened conscious self –loathing and alienation. He cannot but return to Nancy after his circular flight. So Nancy is not what Steven Marcus calls "an angel of hell who cannot resist herself from going there again and again", rather she is a saving and salvaging angel.

Nancy is a suffering but heroic soul who feels within herself a deep sense of having done wrong and obtains her salvation in her confession in front of Rose, "I have been a liar throughout my wretched life." In spite of her remorse and despair, Nancy is free from hatred and bitterness. She submits to death as an act of homage to love and humanity. Her death is not death in the ordinary sense, but an act of sacrifice – a triumph of love through death. Her love transmutes and transcends the cruelty and meanness of Victorian society as well as the violence of the underworld.

In *Oliver Twist* Dickens communicates his moral vision by showing the triumph of the good over the bad but we should not forget that these good people are helpless without Nancy and in time of crises they seek help from her. Nancy's blood does not go waste; as Bailey says 'her murder assumes the proportions of national crises,' "Spies", we hear, "are hovering about in every direction." Significantly, until the murder no one seems to take notice of Fagin – he is engrossed in his repellent business, like any other citizen – but after it, he is nearly lynched. Her blood haunts Sikes also wherever he goes and walks. It is under the illusion of her eyes that Sikes gets himself hanged, "The eyes again!" Sikes cries in an unearthly screech. Thus Nancy's blood causes a catharsis; it washes out all evils.

Though Nancy is handicapped by her fate, she faces it bravely, and unlike Oedipus she is under no illusion about her end. Like Antigone she is conscious of her fate but her character is greater than

that of Antigone in the sense that unlike Antigone she does not blindly follow her instincts but is able to comprehend the situation fully. She takes rational steps which are harmful neither to Oliver nor to her companions. It is her misfortune that she is murdered by Sikes in a moment fraught with fate. Often in this imperfect world those who think and act better suffer the most. Yet death for Nancy is a release. It relieves her from the infernal vice – like underworld.

Dickens has portrayed Oliver as “the principle of good surviving through adverse circumstances and triumphing at last” but Oliver seeks the author’s help while Nancy takes no help from anybody. She is the active principle of good, sacrificing for others. Nancy is a true Christian. Her death is “sublime” - an inspired act of sacrifice which translates into action the commandment of Christ: “This is my commandment that ye love one another as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Thus Nancy is the most powerfully dramatized character, illuminating and integrating the tensions and conflicts in the novel’s experiences.

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